

FIRST STRIKE:

An Interview with Daniel Ellsberg

Daniel Ellsberg began his career as a specialist for the Pentagon on nuclear command and control systems. He drafted the policy guidance memorandum for the 1961 operational plan for strategic warfare. His public release of the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971 marked his break with a career that spanned the administrations of four presidents. Now he devotes himself to speeches and direct action for nuclear arms limitation. He spoke with *INQUIRY* in March on the hidden strategy behind the Pentagon's call for a dramatic buildup in America's nuclear arsenal.

Q: America now controls more than 30,000 nuclear warheads: about 22,000 tactical (short-range) weapons with the same average yield as the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombs, and more than 10,000 strategic (intercontinental) weapons with yields of up to 500 times that size. Do we need all those to deter a Soviet attack on the United States?

ELLSBERG: No. That's not what most of our weapons are for, and—contrary to what most Americans suppose—it never has been. Consider these facts: A single Poseidon submarine at sea, with 224 warheads, could destroy every Soviet city with a population of 100,000 or over. We have about 30 Poseidon and Polaris submarines at sea on alert at all times, and the Russians don't have the antisubmarine warfare capability to track and



destroy a single one of them.

Four or five of these submarines, enough to keep two at sea at all times, carry just 10 percent of our actual inventory of strategic warheads. The other 90 percent, including all our land-based missiles and our bombers—and the thousands of strategic warheads that Carter and now Reagan propose to add on: MX, Trident, and cruise missiles—probably don't add anything at all to the deterrence of a nuclear attack on this country. But, I repeat, in the eyes of war planners and the proponents of these weapons, that's not what they're for.

Q: What are most of these weapons for, then?

ELLSBERG: To threaten or carry out counterforce attacks, that is, attacks on Soviet military capabilities—air bases, missile launching sites, sub pens, command posts, air defenses, and so forth—primarily in the context of a U.S. first strike. By that I don't mean U.S. "preventive war," an aggressive attack out of the blue, but a U.S.-initiated attack on the Soviet homeland, either escalating an ongoing local conflict or in anticipation of a possible escalation by the Soviets. In either case, the major object would be to destroy Soviet nuclear missiles and planes before they had been launched.

Q: Haven't various presidents committed us to not carrying out a first strike?

ELLSBERG: No. Never. Our military strategy has been based, ever since the debut of atomic weapons in 1945, on our possible first use of nuclear weapons to back up and complement any nonnuclear defense or intervention that we might make. Our planners have never

allowed for an extreme firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons. As our adversaries and allies know well, but our own public much less so, every President has refused to pledge "no first use" of nuclear weapons—though the Soviets have repeatedly proposed this as a bilateral commitment—and indeed, each has explicitly reaffirmed our commitment to first use in at least some circumstances, such as an attack on our NATO allies.

Our NATO plans have always been explicitly premised on a U.S. first strike in response to a Soviet nonnuclear attack that NATO couldn't contain with conventional or tactical nuclear warfare (the latter we might refer to as NATO "first use," to distinguish it from a strategic "first strike" against a superpower's retaliatory forces). For most of the era since 1949, when NATO was formed, the United States promised a first strike to come within hours or days of the onset of any sizable Soviet attack. Remember that our Strategic Air Command (SAC) was set up immediately after World War II to drop atomic bombs, if need be, on Russia at a time when the Soviets were not expected by our military or President Truman to deploy any nuclear weapons for a decade or more. SAC's *only* mission in that initial period was to threaten or carry out a U.S. first strike; *not at all* to deter or retaliate for a nuclear attack on the United States or anywhere else.

Even after the Russians' first test in 1949 and their H-bomb tests in the mid-fifties, the U.S. ability to threaten or carry out a first strike amounted to a monopoly until as late as the mid-sixties, because our superiority in delivery capability was so overwhelming. In 1961, the year of the predicted "missile gap," the United States had within range of Russia about 3000 bombers, over 40 ICBMs, 48 Polaris missiles, and another 100 long-range missiles in Europe. The Soviets had about 190 intercontinental bombers (the same ones they're flying today) and exactly 4 ICBMs—four soft, nonalert, liquid-fueled ICBMs, at one site at Plesetsk that was vulnerable to a small slow U.S. attack with conventional weapons. When Kennedy urged the American people to prepare fallout shelters during the Berlin crisis that year, it was not for a nuclear war that would be started by the Soviets.

Q: Were these "gap" alarms—which we've heard again in the last few years—simply manipulated, then? What was their object?

ELLSBERG: Warnings of imminent Russian "superiority" were conscious exaggerations amounting to hoaxes, and that is just as true of the warnings we hear today (from some of the same people, such as Paul Nitze), though the reality now is parity, or "rough equivalence," rather than the past overwhelming U.S. superiority. It was not only the desire for profits, jobs, and votes associated with war production that led to these alarms, though of course these motives did figure as well. Planners, presidents, and "statesmen" in the corporate world saw an ominous possibility as the Soviets tested new weapons and vehicles—usually, then as now, four to five years behind our own development and deployment. Their fear was that the Soviets might some day achieve a retaliatory capability roughly *equivalent* to ours, eliminating our decisive first-strike superiority. To head off that possibility, these planners had to reject arms control proposals that would have constrained our own advances—like a comprehensive test ban agreement or a "freeze" on all new missile testing and deployment. They also had to whip up public fears of imminent U.S. "inferiority," to mobilize support for vastly expensive arms spending that would assure us, in fact, of a continued U.S. superiority.

Q: You're saying that our planners have always been seeking U.S. nuclear superiority?

ELLSBERG: Yes. Superiority at every level of nuclear confrontation, including theater nuclear warfare—that's what the proposed, highly precise Pershing intermediate range missiles and the ground-launched cruise missiles for Europe are all about; that and strategic counterforce, first-strike capability. In other words, a superior ability to destroy the opponent's retaliatory forces. As Henry Kissinger put it in late 1979, in a revealing speech before the International Institute of Strategic Studies: "Our strategic doctrine has relied extraordinarily, perhaps exclusively, on our superior strategic power. The Soviet Union has never relied on its superior strategic power. . . . Therefore, even an equivalence in destructive power, even assured destruction for both sides, is a revolution in NATO doctrine as we have known it." He goes on to endorse the development of weapons like the MX missile that promise, with their highly accurate, high-yield warheads, to help America regain its lost superiority in first-strike capability.

Q: When did we lose that superiority?

ELLSBERG: Starting in 1967, when the Russians finally began protecting their retaliatory force by installing missiles in hardened, concrete silos. This Soviet buildup, from close to nothing sixteen years into the nuclear era to 1400 hardened land-based ICBMs today, could probably have been prevented at various times along the way if we had accepted Soviet proposals for a comprehensive ban on warhead testing or missile testing or both, adequately monitored by U.S. national means of detection. Brezhnev, displacing Khrushchev in 1964, seems to have promised the Soviet military to spend whatever it would take to avoid inferiority, in the absence of arms limitation agreements that put a ceiling on U.S. forces. The Soviets proceeded to outspend us in the seventies, when they finally duplicated the huge investments in strategic capabilities that we had made in the fifties and sixties. At great sacrifice, they have at last bought "equivalence" and removed the American first-strike threat. Now we're being mobilized for the big effort to buy that threat back unilaterally by adding MX and Trident to our anti-submarine capability.

Q: Might we achieve that?

ELLSBERG: We can't buy back our monopoly of the fifties, or even our overwhelming superiority of the mid-sixties, but for a couple of hundred billion dollars we might get back a first-strike capability something like that of 1967–69, if the Russians stood still for this, which they probably won't.

Q: Why would anyone think that was worth the money?

ELLSBERG: To back up the credibility of our first-use threat; to initiate local, tactical nuclear war where that is needed to keep our conventional forces from being overwhelmed either by the Soviets or by local non-Soviet forces.

Q: But how could we make first-use threats credible against Soviet troops, or elsewhere in the world where our adversaries are likely to be allies of the Soviet Union? In other words, how can we keep from being deterred ourselves by the prospect of Soviet retaliation?

ELLSBERG: That really comes down to the question of how we can ensure that our use of tactical nuclear weapons, or our threatened use, would remain one-sided, rather than leading to a two-way exchange, the prospect of which would deter us in the first place. Or, if some retaliation does occur, how can we keep

it very limited, to a level acceptable to ourselves? The Pentagon's answer is that we must have a threat of escalating the conflict that is more credible than the Soviets can make, should they choose to match us in the local area with nuclear retaliation. This means being able not only to escalate, say, to a theater-wide level, but to escalate again and again, if necessary, to a level where the Soviets will be unable or afraid to match us. That calls for forces that are superior to those of the Soviets at virtually every level of nuclear conflict, up to a fully disarming first strike or a campaign of annihilation.

Q: Are you saying, in other words, that nuclear weapons are seen as viable and realistic weapons for actual war fighting?

ELLSBERG: Well, yes and no. One doesn't actually have to be optimistic about how the conflict would come out. I don't think that the people who back these weapons are awfully optimistic about that, but they don't think that's necessary. The key thing, as they see it, is to confront the Soviets with at least a significant uncertainty as to whether we might escalate the conflict in the face of their obvious capability to reply. These people want the Soviets to think that U.S. planners and decision makers *might* escalate, given our advantage in weapons.

Q: So they hope to have the Soviets back down before we would ever get to the point of actually having to use the weapons?

ELLSBERG: That's right, precisely.

it, the Soviets would have to tread cautiously lest we be foolish enough to believe our own calculations. Sounds complicated, but I would have to admit it might work. Then again, it might not.

Q: Is this all just a bluff, then?

ELLSBERG: Unfortunately not. Our efforts to increase the credibility and effectiveness of these threats commit us to a whole range of actions that—unless our threats always work perfectly, which they won't—make it likely that sooner or later we ourselves will turn a nonnuclear conflict into a nuclear one, or a local nuclear exchange into a global one. With the Soviets having bought parity, it's much harder and more expensive than before to make our threats look credible, and no matter how much we commit ourselves, the threats are more likely to fail at some point, and then have to be carried out. When that happens, the consequences will be far more dangerous for us and for the whole world than when we first adopted this strategy twenty to thirty years ago.

Q: What makes these risks look worthwhile to anyone? Why are we continuing with this approach, in the face of the Soviet determination to match us?

ELLSBERG: For the same reasons that led us to adopt it in the first place, and a few new ones. The oldest reason, which still applies, is the desire to defend Western Europe without investing the additional money needed to provide an adequate nonnuclear defense against a nonnuclear Soviet attack. Given the

neighboring regions since they border on Russia, and are far from our own supply lines.

Our current dilemma merely exposes the fact that our previous strategic nuclear monopoly, definitely a thing of the past, permitted and encouraged us to claim what amounted to a global "sphere of predominant influence" that ran right up to the borders of Soviet occupation everywhere in the world, including northern Iran. There is no adequate military alternative if we are going to continue to assert a right and intention to intervene militarily in a corner of Russia's borders where we lack the allies and bases of Western Europe. Thus Harold Brown, in the last administration, assured us that the Carter Doctrine was no bluff by asserting our readiness to use nuclear weapons if necessary, and accompanying those words with deployments of nuclear-equipped carriers and bombers to the Indian Ocean. Defense Department officials candidly describe our proposed Rapid Deployment Force as a "tripwire" to what would be best a regionally "limited" Domsday Machine. And already President Reagan has pointed to the extension of that wire back to SAC headquarters in Omaha by warning that a Russian challenge to the U.S. forces he proposes to base in the Middle East would inescapably incur a "risk of World War III."

Q: You say that you don't have a military alternative to propose?

ELLSBERG: No adequate, unilateral U.S. military alternative. But making commitments and taking actions that measurably increase the likelihood of blowing the lid off the Northern Hemisphere doesn't strike me as an acceptable approach to any objective whatever—even to deterring outright Soviet aggression against "our" oilfields in the Middle East. Instead we must rely on diplomatic, economic, and multilateral sanctions, along with reducing Western dependence on that oil. If that doesn't sound adequate, all I can say is that this is not the only problem in the world for which there is *no* adequate U.S. military solution. Possible Soviet aggression against Poland is another, much more immediate example, one that is extremely anguishing to me.

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Again, this attitude doesn't depend on a certainty that in an actual two-sided exchange we would really come out well. But just by trying hard enough, we might get back what Herman Kahn once called "a not-incredible first-strike capability." The theory is that after seeing us work so hard to sell the feasibility of a "war-winning" capability to various skeptical constituencies, and after we've spent so much money to achieve

manpower and economic resources of the NATO alliance, much larger than those of the Warsaw Pact, the conventional alternative is surely feasible, but also very expensive. The newest reason is the collapse of our strategy for assuring our control of the distribution of Middle East oil by supporting the shah's dictatorship in Iran. By ourselves we are unable to protect with nonnuclear forces our "vital interest" in northern Iran and

Q: Are there other reasons for our buildup that apply outside Europe and the perimeter of Russia?

ELLSBERG: The broadest reason of all: the prospect of wars in the future like

tactical nuclear warfare, preparations in every case "leaked" to the enemy, and in several cases accompanied by secret, explicit, official threats.

In the cases involving the Russians

'Every President from Truman on—except Ford—has directed preparations for initiation of tactical nuclear war.'

those we have actually fought since World War II, wars against non-Soviet and nonnuclear adversaries. I think that the Reagan administration—like the Carter administration, really—recognizes a future need for "more Vietnams." Not that they hope for this—although, accepting the inevitable, some may see early "demonstrations" of efficient brutality as desirable: El Salvador may suffer the burden of this.

This administration sees it as inescapable that the United States will have to pursue its "interests" abroad by sending expeditionary forces when other means of influence such as trade and finance and CIA intervention fail. But these future Vietnams must be planned with an eye to the lessons of Vietnam, which include the political lesson that for reasons of economics and domestic public opinion, we can't count on sending 500,000 or more U.S. troops abroad. Which means that there must be a much more effective and brutal and early use of American firepower backed up—in places, *unlike* El Salvador, that are far from our logistical base—by the clear threat and the willingness to employ tactical nuclear weapons to support these troops.

Q: Would a President seriously consider using nuclear weapons against a country that didn't possess them?

ELLSBERG: First, that's how Harry Truman used them, in August 1945. Second, it's safer than using them against the Soviets. Third, every President from Truman on (with the exception of Ford) has had occasion in an ongoing, urgent crisis to direct serious preparations for possible imminent U.S. initiation of tac-

directly, the warnings and preparations were public: the Berlin crisis of 1961, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the Carter Doctrine last year, and now, Reagan's comments on his strategy for defending the Middle East. But a larger number of cases involved threats or preparations against nonnuclear adversaries who were, however, supported by the Soviets, so that our tactical threats needed backing by our strategic near-monopoly. A public instance was Tru-

man's warning in December, 1950, that we were considering nuclear weapons, the day after the Chinese surrounded marine units at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea.

The other cases were highly secret at the time, but are documented now in memoirs or declassified papers. They include Eisenhower's secret threat to the Chinese that he would drop nuclear bombs on their homeland if they did not meet his terms in negotiations at Panmunjom, Korea, in the spring of 1953. In 1954 Dulles offered Premier Georges Bidault of France three U.S. tactical nuclear weapons for the defense of Dien-bienphu in Indochina. In 1958, Eisenhower directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan on the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Chinese shore batteries blockading the offshore island of Quemoy if the Chinese attempted to invade Quemoy or if they continued an effective blockade. In 1968, the Joint Chiefs advised Johnson that nuclear

Nixon's Madman Theory

From *The Ends of Power*, by H. R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona

The Communists regarded [Nixon] as an uncompromising enemy whose hatred for their philosophy had been spelled out over and over again in two decades of public life. Nixon saw his advantage in that fact. "They'll believe any threat of force that Nixon makes because it's Nixon," he said. . . .

The threat was the key, and Nixon coined a phrase for his theory which I'm sure will bring smiles of delight to Nixon-haters everywhere. We were walking along a foggy beach after a long day of speechwriting. He said, "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do *anything* to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace." . . .

Nixon had conceived the "Madman Theory" as the way to do it. Henry [Kissinger] perfected the theory and carried it to the secret series of Paris peace talks: A threat of egregious military action by an unpredictable U.S. President who hated Communism, coupled with generous offers of financial aid. Henry arrived at the peace negotiations fully expecting his plan to be successful.

But there the theory—and Nixon and Kissinger's hopes for peace in Nixon's first year—crumbled. Henry found the North Vietnamese absolutely intractable. They wouldn't even negotiate. And the reason was clear. No threat, and no offer, could obscure one great fact known to the world at large. The American people had turned against the war. The young were saying they wouldn't fight it. The response to Eugene McCarthy's Democratic primary campaign in 1968 convinced the North Vietnamese that it was only a matter of time before the U.S. would *have* to pull out, no matter what. So why negotiate?

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weapons would have to be considered if a final assault were made on the marines surrounded at Khe Sanh, in South Vietnam, when the weather was unsuitable for close air support.

In 1968 and later, as H. R. Haldeman has revealed in his memoirs [see accompanying excerpt] and other officials have confirmed, Richard Nixon was determined to win the Vietnam War the same way his former boss, Eisenhower, had ended the Korean War. Starting in 1969, Nixon made direct, secret threats to the Hanoi regime that as of November 1969, he would escalate the war massively, including the possible use of nuclear weapons, if it did not accept the terms Nixon describes in his own memoirs as his "November ultimatum." Roger Morris, who worked on these escalation plans under Henry Kissinger, reports seeing the actual mission folders, including photographs, for nuclear targets recommended to the President—one of them a railhead in North Vietnam a mile and a half from the Chinese border.

Q: How is it, then, that no nuclear weapons have actually been used since Nagasaki?

ELLSBERG: The meaning of the historical record I've just described is that nuclear weapons, both tactical and strategic, *have been used, again and again—in the way that a gun is "used" when you point it at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled.* Reagan is using our weapons now—and not for deterring an attack on the United States—when he tells interviewers that the Russians are risking World War III if they move further in the Middle East. Presidents buy these weapons because they expect to use them, based on their knowledge of a largely secret history—which both they and their adversaries know better than the American public does—of how past presidents threatened their use, and often with some significant success.

As for why the threats weren't actually carried out: in most cases they didn't have to be, perhaps because they were effective. The marines fought their way out at the Chosin Reservoir and they weren't assaulted at Khe Sanh; the Chinese accepted our armistice terms in Korea and later ended the daily shelling of Quemoy.

Q: So such threats can work?

ELLSBERG: Sure. My objection to this whole approach is not that it can't possibly work. In fact, for most of that period our strategic superiority was so overwhelming that such a threat, from the country that had attacked Hiroshima, was far more likely to work than a lot of critics of Dulles's "massive retaliation" strategy and brinkmanship could

'Nuclear weapons have been used, again and again, in the way that a gun is used when you point it at someone's head in a confrontation.'

possibly imagine. Their false belief, fostered by hawks in both parties, was that the Russians were already equal to us and about to move decisively ahead.

By the same token, we should note that the 1969 threat in Vietnam—which, like the Carter Doctrine, demonstrated that U.S. presidents continued to rely on nuclear threats after our loss of superiority—did *not* succeed. Hanoi never did accept the terms of Nixon's November ultimatum; yet Nixon's own discussion, and his actions later, indicate strongly that it was not a bluff.

Why was that escalation not carried out? Nixon himself gives the reason: There were too many Americans on the streets, peacefully demonstrating against the war. On October 15, and again on November 15, 1969, in the moratorium and the Washington March Against Death, the protests happened to straddle his secret November 1 deadline. As he saw it, they kept him from ending the war, his way, his first year in office. From another point of view, the protests—whose power Nixon kept as secret from the public as his ultimatum—may have prolonged the moratorium on the combat use of nuclear weapons by more than a decade.

Q: Why didn't Truman and Eisenhower make their threats public at the time—they were no secret to the enemy!—and take credit for success, revealing our actual superiority and the need to maintain it?

ELLSBERG: Because they knew that too many citizens would have reacted against what seems all the more true now: the fact that the threats were not, ever, *certain* to work; that cumulatively, each one raised the likelihood of our own eventual initiation of nuclear war; that the credibility and effectiveness of this strategy would drop sharply and its risks rise sharply when the Russians acquired a strong retaliatory force, as has finally happened; and that to pursue superiority was to ensure an indefinitely prolonged arms race, increasing the chances of proliferation, nuclear weapons accidents, false alarms, and small wars triggering big ones.

Meanwhile the chances for success are going down—which is still not to say that our first-use and first-strike threats cannot succeed in a given case—temporarily saving "our" oil in the Middle East in some future year of crisis, for example, at the risk of World War III. At the same time, the costs are going up. The hundreds of billions of dollars to be spent pursuing superiority are hardly even worth counting next to the truly relevant long-run price: the continued postponement of a global effort *led* by the United States to stop and then reverse the arms race and proliferation, and to delegitimize and eliminate preparations to initiate nuclear war under any circumstances, by anyone.

Thirty years ago, our national leaders pioneered a strategy based on threats of regional genocide: the indiscriminate, massive slaughter of innocents foreseeable even in the most "limited" of nuclear wars. The pursuit of superiority in the face of current Soviet forces is meant to prolong that reliance on nuclear threats into an era when such threats will be vastly more dangerous than before; likely now to be suicidal as well as genocidal, yet more likely to be challenged and then carried out.

Faced with this shocking awareness, we may cling all the harder to the leadership, the values, and the strategy that have worked so well up till now. Or we can awaken at last to the reality of what we are doing and where we are heading, and discover, in a different direction, a way for us all to survive together on this earth.